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# Visual Culture in the Classroom

BY PAUL DUNCUM



The four images presented in this Instructional Resource are only examples of the kinds of images art teachers interested in visual culture might consider. Other rich sites of contemporary visual culture include theme parks, television drama and news broadcasts, magazine advertisements, community celebrations, fast food restaurants, and computer games.<sup>1</sup>

A set of activities and guiding questions is suggested with each of the four images. The questions are intended to lead students in their thinking while making their own images. They are intended to be controversial and to facilitate discussion, even debate, rather than lead to a solution to which everyone in the class agrees. The questions raise issues; they do not settle them.

Instead of directing attention to these specific four images, the activities and questions suggested here are more concerned with similar images, including the contexts in which they are made. This is why some questions deal with economic and political issues. The questions also deal with how students, and people generally, view these kind of images. The suggested activities and guiding questions work together to help facilitate a considered view on issues of direct relevance to students' developing grasp of themselves and their world. Students are given the chance to reflect on, and respond to, the challenges of living in a culture undergird by consumerism and saturated by imagery.



# Visual Culture in the Classroom

*Recommended for upper elementary, middle, and high school students.*



Family Photography. (From a framed photographic display of Sophie Duncum, age 8-9 years. The author's daughter)



## Family Photography

(From a framed photographic display of Sophie Duncum, age 8-9 years. The author's daughter)

Family photographs are usually private, not public, images. Though mundane to others, to those whose families are pictured they are a source of infinite enchantment. The family photographs here have been taken out of their normal context and made public so that here they stand for all family photographs. Often being the first thing people will rescue from the threat of fire or flood, family photographs are among our most prized possessions. They are a record of our lives lived together, an irreplaceable record of all the love and heartbreak within a family, all the hope and all the disappointments.

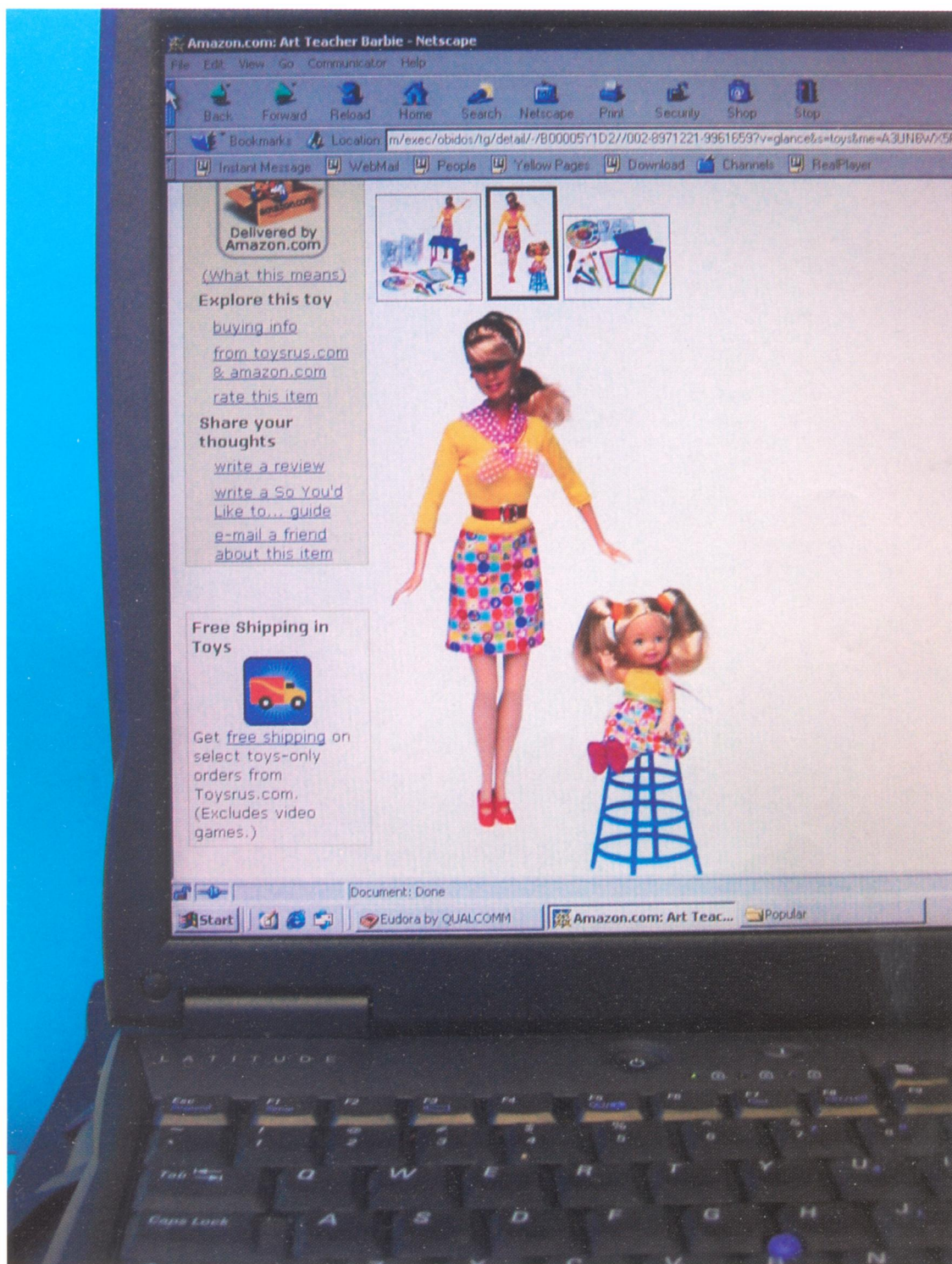
Family photographs are of immense personal and social significance. They are both powerful and silent, a mediation point between an ideal and actual, lived reality. At a time of ever greater fragmentation among families, their importance in helping to maintain personal identity and, beyond, to social stability, has never been higher. At any one time more people are taking family photographs than making any other kind of image.

### Activities

- Ask students to draw a story or write about a particular photograph of themselves indicating how it was taken, when, where, and by whom. Have them include all the details they can recall that are not in the picture. They might draw comic strips involving family arguments about who should take the photographs, who should be in them, and whether they should be taken at all.
- Provide students with instamatic or digital cameras to photograph their family. Then have them consider whether they asked their family to pose or whether they tried to capture them off guard, as in the style of a documentary.
- Visit a retirement home and talk with elderly people about photographs of their families from years ago. Have the students listen to the elderly people reminisce about their lives. Be aware that this can be a deeply emotional experience for all involved.
- Have students select a family photograph and give a short talk about it. Again, be prepared for this to be deeply emotional experience for some students, especially where there has been a family break-up. Some students may need to read prepared statements because otherwise they will not be able to speak.
- Students can examine family photography from the 19th century, where invariably the poses are stiff and faces are unsmiling. Have students compare them to contemporary professional family photography as well as informal snapshots. Also, have students examine paintings of families from the 17th to the 19th centuries: for example, paintings by Velasquez, Rubens, Van Dyck, and Goya, noting differences of formality in poses, facial expression, clothing, setting and action, and what these imply about familial relationships.

### Guiding Questions

- Does anyone in particular typically take photographs of your family, and why? Is family photography gendered? (In other words, is the photographer always female or always male?)
- In examining a photograph of yourself, how would you describe your expression? Is there ever a difference between the way you appear in a photograph and the way you were feeling at the time?
- Do family photographs exclude as much as they include and sometimes construct a false idea of family life?
- What are the differences between informal snaps and a formal family portrait?
- Why are the codes of family snap photography so well known that snaps turn out looking very much the same as every other family? Is this influenced by the limitations of the technology, the purpose of family photography, habit, or does the mass media teach us the codes?
- Can family photography ever involve an invasion of privacy? Does family photography ever become a power play on one or both sides of the camera?
- Do the terms take a photograph, capture someone on film, and shoot a snapshot suggest that taking family photographs can sometimes be an aggressive act?



Consumer Goods. (Shopping on the Web for Art Teacher Barbie®)

## Consumer Goods

(Shopping on the Web for Art Teacher Barbie®)

Since the 1950s advertisers have targeted teenagers, and over the past few decades this has extended downwards towards children. Children possess little economic power, but considerable “pester power” by which they influence purchasing decisions made by other family members. Reduced family size, uneven but generally higher levels of disposable income, and the sanctification of childhood now present children with unprecedented purchasing power. In the United States, children are estimated to be responsible for about \$10 billion in purchases while they influence about a further \$130 billion worth of purchases (Buckingham, 2000, p. 147). No wonder then that producers have adopted a “child-centered” approach to product promotion.

In consuming, we never simply reproduce ourselves physically; we also reproduce specific, meaningful ways of life. All products are simultaneously commodities and reference points for living. In a capitalist society, consumerism permeates the very fabric of everyday existence. Whether we approve or not, it is the basis of our economy and one of the major pillars of our culture.

### Activities

- Students can devise their own products for particular markets as well as devise a marketing campaign for their products. They might include advertisements with slogans and text, bumper stickers, websites, or even a television commercial. If they were to devise a shopping mall on the Web, they would begin to understand how the Web entices the act of purchasing.
- Have students comb through magazines looking for their favorite products. Students can create a kind of self-portrait consisting of their favorite products, so that they see how their tastes are socially constructed.
- Students can also compare advertising today with advertising from the 19th century. Focus especially on how images are now much more important than in earlier periods.
- Have students rank advertisements for the impact or significance of words versus pictures on a scale of 1 to 10.
- Students could take an advertisement and alter it, or appropriate it, so as to turn its message on its head or to make an ironic comment upon it. This could be done with the addition of words or by juxtaposing the advertisement with other images.

## Guiding Questions

- Are consumers generally rational or irrational, in charge of themselves or manipulated, autonomous or over concerned with the opinion of others, active or passive, creative or conformist? Is there a difference between how we see ourselves as consumers and how we see others?
- Is consumerism gendered? For example, how legitimate is the common perception that males are rational but females are irrational consumers?
- In a market characterized by both mass and niche marketing, is consumption a matter of keeping up with the Joneses, or keeping different from the Joneses?
- In noting both the way consumerism delineates between social groups and the depletion of resources, does consumerism divide more than it provides?
- How do people feel who cannot pay the membership fee for living in a consumer culture—that is, people who do not have sufficient money to participate?
- Does living in a consumer culture lead people to being unhappy because it shows more of what they cannot have than it offers what they can have?
- When is consuming an act of love, cherishing, devouring, relishing, exhausting, cannibalizing, to be satisfied or remain unsatisfied, to feel full or empty, to be completed or alienated, excited or bored, and so on?
- Is it legitimate to treat all problems as solvable, as advertising does? In short, are there limits to consumer culture, and if so, what are they? What doesn't consumer culture satisfy?

## Tourist Souvenirs

(Biker "Tasmanian Devil" Soft Toy)

(Courtesy of Tasile Products)

Tourism is a big and booming business. It is about sites and sights—with most people visiting tourist sites to see the sights rather than to understand them. Tourists are usually glancing while moving on somewhere else, pausing only momentarily to purchase a souvenir with which to remember the experience. Souvenirs represent a place, event, people, or a culture. Souvenirs act to jog the memory and provide proof that one was there, even when the souvenir has little or nothing to do with the tourist site it represents. (The soft toy Biker Devil here is humorous, but far more closely resembles a real Tasmanian Devil than the cartoon version.)

Exotic places and cultures have become commodified, and tourism is a significant factor in social and environmental change among many communities and habitats around the world. With tourism the local meets the global, and while this often helps to keep traditional, local character alive, often the illusion of local character is manufactured to attract the tourist dollar. Throughout the world many communities are now dependent for their economic survival upon turning themselves into tourist meccas with souvenirs to suit every age and pocket.

### Activities

- As a class activity, visit a souvenir shop and interview the proprietor about who buys what and why. Devise a short questionnaire and have students ask tourists about their experiences—why they came, what they expected, and what they are finding.
- Make a tourist souvenir that reflects students' own understanding of where they live. Focus on the material used and what is typical versus what is unique to your area.
- Make a tourist poster that includes what students consider stereotypical interpretations of national, state, or local character.
- List the kind of objects tourists collected as souvenirs in past centuries. Investigate the practices of European art historians who plundered ancient civilizations and where their collections are now housed. Study how some European explorers even captured indigenous peoples to display in popular shows back in Europe.

### Guiding Questions

- How important is tourism to your own local economy? Why is this so?
- What kinds of souvenirs are available in your local area? What makes them specific to your area? Is it their subject matter, what they are made of, or do they just rely on a label?
- When we offer ourselves—whether as a country, state or local district—as a tourist destination, do we always recog-

nize ourselves? For example, when tourist souvenirs are humorous, are we laughing at ourselves or allowing others to laugh at us at our expense?

- What are the practical concerns of size and weight that help determine the nature of tourist souvenirs?
- Are tourist souvenirs of your local district made locally? Perhaps they are even made in another country. (The soft toy Biker Devil is made in China.)
- What are some typical attitudes towards tourists in your local area, and why are they held? Are the attitudes ambiguous, reflecting both a need for tourist dollars and resentment at such dependence?
- To what extent do local tourist souvenirs reflect where you live? Perhaps they have no connection with your locality? If so, why do people collect tourist souvenirs?

## Teenagers' Bedrooms

(Amelia Wright, age 16, with her Bedroom Wall Display)

Teenagers spend 20% of their time in the classroom but a full 13% in their bedrooms (cited in Grauer, 2002). Their bedrooms are a private and safe space in which they are relatively free to construct their personal identity; indeed, for most teens, their bedrooms are the most extensive canvases they have on which to express themselves. Their bedrooms are mediating spaces in which teens attempt to work through who they are, more related to their peers than their parents, no longer children but not yet adults.

Much of what they choose to surround themselves with are consumer goods and mass media imagery. Often, as with Amelia's bedroom display, teen bedrooms are festooned with the labels of multinational corporations and popular signs. Their bedrooms are like a bricolage, a collection of items taken from corporate culture and used by teens for their own purposes. Out of the offerings by the media and marketing giants of global capital, teens sample and appropriate in pursuit of the core work of adolescence, that of creating a personal identity. Teens enjoy control over what they choose, but they have little control over what they chose from, and, increasingly, as corporations merge to become even larger corporations, the extent of choice becomes more and more illusory.

### Activities

- Have students take photographs of their bedrooms and discuss them in class. Focus especially on the number and range of corporate consumer goods using some of the questions below as a starting point. Exchange stories about what is "cool" and what is "uncool" and why things go in and out of fashion.
- Introduce students to the technical aspects of photography, including lighting, framing, depth of field, and angles of view. Then, have students retake photographs of their





Tourist Souvenirs. (Biker "Tasmanian Devil" Soft Toy, Courtesy of Tasile Products)



